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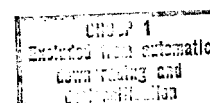
MEMORANDUM FOR THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

SUBJECT: Possible Viet Cong Plans for Increasing Their Strength in South Vietnam

1. In response to your memorandum of 12 July forwarding an appraisal of reported Viet Cong plans for increasing their strength in South Vietnam, I have asked my analysts to examine the appraisal and assess its validity. Their comments follow:

A. With regard to the Secretary of Defense's memorandum of 12 July, we agree that the Viet Cong almost certainly intend to augment the size of their full-time ("main force") military organization, but we have some reservations about the details of the appraisal on which our comments are requested. We do not know on what sources this appraisal is based. Furthermore, the appraisal sets no time frame for its estimates and the question of timing is crucial to any assessment of these estimates' validity. For example, the appraisal estimates that the VC intend almost to double the number of their combat units and practically treble the number of their full-time regular soldiers. An increase of this magnitude might be possible over a period of time, but does not appear likely in much less than two years. We do not believe any such increase could be effected within a short space of time, such as a few months. Also, we believe any major augmentation of VC forces, particularly one of the magnitude projected in this appraisal, would require at least a continuation of present levels of infiltration of troops from North Vietnam and probably an appreciable increase in the number of officers, cadre and technicians brought in from North Vietnam.

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B. On matters of detail, we offer the following comments:

1. The estimate of present VC strength is that generally used by the intelligence community, although we believe no numerical description can be confidently or very accurately given with regard to the size of the VC irregular and political activist forces.

2. The matter of VC district "companies" and provincial "battalions" involves some slippery semantics. The VC already have "companies" in most districts and "battalions" in most provinces, but these units vary widely in size, composition and equipment. There is unquestionably an ongoing program to improve the capabilities of these forces at all levels. During the spring there were persistent rumors -- at least in IV Corps -- that these local units were to be upgraded at each administrative echelon (i.e., that the VC wanted to form hamlet platoons, village companies, district battalions, and provincial regiments). We do not have enough firm evidence, however, to judge how far the VC have gone with such endeavors or what their precise intentions are in this regard.

3. The VC undoubtedly intend to increase the size of their main force or "regular" military establishment. In perhaps two years, they probably could build it up to a force about equal to the present ARVN strength in terms of effective fighting units; they could not achieve such a build-up in the space of a few months. Furthermore, we believe the main thrust of the VC's military expansion effort will probably not be directed towards simply creating more units of the same size

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and nature as those presently employed by the VC in South Vietnam. Instead, the VC will probably channel their expansion efforts into an attempt to move at least one notch up the ladder in the structural capabilities of some of their present main force elements, i.e., to move from organic regiments into organic brigades and, perhaps, even nascent divisions.

4. Any substantial increase in VC regular strength will have to involve shifting or "promoting" substantial numbers of men from irregulars to regulars. (In practice, this would probably involve moving part-time guerrillas into full-time local units at hamlet or district level, moving present district troops up to provincial formations, and having provincial formations provide levies for new main force units.) The handling of the "political activists" is a little more complicated, since this broad and rather vaguely defined category includes not only local propagandists who could be converted to soldiers but also rather high-level and experienced specialists who would probably remain in full time political work, though some of the latter could well be used to serve as the political commissars for newly formed main force units.

5. We doubt if there will be an appreciable "new" draft of 18-26 year olds. There are already signs that for some months the VC have been drafting even 15 and 16 year olds to serve at least in village and hamlet units.

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6. We believe the appraisal underestimates the importance of infiltration and the role infiltrated elements would probably play in any expansion of VC forces of the magnitude indicated by that appraisal. Present levels of VC strength and effectiveness could not have been achieved without the substantial infiltration of officers, senior noncoms, technicians and political cadre from North Vietnam. (It has been estimated that the total number of persons infiltrated since 1961 is probably on the order of 45,000, though many of these -- indeed, until last year, practically all infiltrees -- were ethnic southerners who had been taken to North Vietnam for indoctrination and training.) Current main force strength could be augmented from the ranks of the VC irregulars, but main force units newly formed from these irregulars would have to have a substantial infusion of officers, cadre and technicians. The VC might accomplish this, in part, by splitting up present main force units to constitute the nuclei around which new units could be formed, fleshing them out with irregulars, but we believe that any major expansion of VC regular forces would require a considerable infiltration of persons from the North with the qualifications required to provide new units with the leadership and technical competence necessary for combat effectiveness.

7. The numerical projection of probably VC strength is a hazardous enterprise since our current data base is neither precise nor especially reliable. The US intelligence community currently credits the VC with about 50,000 full-time regular troops. The projected 130,000 figure represents a level the VC might attain in something like two years, assuming continued infiltration at present or increased levels, and assuming present levels of combat intensity and current

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loss ratios. We have always regarded the 80-80,000 irregular figure as a convenient numerical way of indicating that there is a large irregular pool on which the VC can draw. For all we know, the actual figure could be considerably in excess of 100,000. Similar comments apply with regard to the category of "political activists".

C. In sum, we would be the last to underestimate VC military capabilities or their ability to expand their forces to whatever level they might feel necessary to prosecute their war in South Vietnam. We have no substantial quarrel with the general levels suggested in this appraisal, but we do feel this appraisal needs to be put in a time frame and, particularly, we think it may pay insufficient attention to the probable VC intention of changing the nature as well as the sheer size of their forces by creating not only new units but also units of a new kind -- e.g., multi-battalion task forces verging on organic brigades and, eventually, even divisions. This was certainly the pattern of Communist military development in the Viet Minh war against the French and may well be a central feature of the current plans of the Viet Cong and their masters in Hanoi.

2. I trust you will find these comments helpful and that you will not hesitate to call on me if we can be of further assistance in this matter.

[(signed) W. F. Raborn

W. F. RABORN
Director

O/DDI []:fbr (14 July 1965)

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